

Nicholas Terpstra / Steven Teasdale

## Renaissance Studies in Canada – Teaching and Research

Renaissance Studies in Canada have long been shaped by the country's migrant character. We can in a certain sense trace this back to Canada's very origins. To say that it originated in the Renaissance may raise eyebrows in some parts of the world, but it expresses a fundamental reality which has been studied in at least one conference and publication aptly title *Decentering the Renaissance*.<sup>[1]</sup> What existed for some centuries as New France was in most respects a trading outpost focused on shipping furs and other staples to Europe. Yet some of the Jesuit missionaries who came with the traders and soldiers pursued a cultural curiosity rooted in their own deeply classical education and resulting in some amazing texts, including the recently published *Codex canadensis*. The manuscript detailing the aboriginal cultures and the natural history of Canada was likely produced by the French Jesuit missionary Louis Nicolas (1634-82) who also wrote an Algonquin grammar and a similar *Histoire Naturelle des Indes Occidentales*.<sup>[2]</sup> The Codex has been described by some authorities as one of the first anthropological studies produced by Europeans of a culture beyond Europe's ken and bounds. This was not the first effort to apply classical learning in what was for these French settlers a new land. In 1663, the Jesuit-trained Bishop François de Laval opened a college, only the fourth in North America, where Jesuit fathers would teach young European seminarians and aboriginals. Those same Jesuits would eventually form a network of colleges where, as in Europe, South America, and Asia, the *Ratio Studiorum* framed an approach to the world which aimed to transform and integrate aboriginal cultures into the European Classical tradition.

The *Codex Canadensis* and the Jesuit colleges bear witness to an early and enduring reality: the further that migrants to the northern half of the American hemisphere had moved physically out of Europe, the more they aimed to keep soul, mind, and creativity in a European framework. Those governors and politicians and pastors who set up colleges and universities through the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aimed to form local boys into new generations of governors, politicians and pastors. To this end they made sure to include courses in the Western Tradition generally or in the histories and literatures of the colonizing powers of England and France. Their professors were, in many cases, new generations of migrants from the colonial metropolises of England, France, and Germany, and eventually from America. For these patrons, professors, and students, studies of philosophy, literature, and the classical tradition were less a subject for study than a means of intellectual and moral formation little changed since the seventeenth century.

That said, the Renaissance as a field of academic study did not expand significantly until the post-World War II expansion of higher education multiplied the number of universities, professors, and students in Canada. Most of what we might call Renaissance Studies developed through the four disciplines of French Literature, English Literature, History, and Art History. Appointments in these departments multiplied in the 1960s and 1970s when rapidly expanding universities plotted their growth along the familiar trajectories of the Western liberal tradition. The newly-appointed professors often came from the United States or Europe, and they started the courses, programs, and study centres

which marked the emergence of the field as a focus of serious study. Among the earliest study centres were the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (CRRS) established at Victoria College in the University of Toronto in 1964 in part to preserve an impressive collection of early volumes of Erasmus left by a classics professor, and the Centres d'Etudes de la Renaissance (CER) established at the Université de Sherbrooke by J.M. de Bujanda in 1968.[3] In the same period, Victoria College developed the country's first undergraduate program in Renaissance Studies with courses in literature and history.

The generation of professors hired in the 1960s and 1970s established further institutional forms and supports for Renaissance Studies. The Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies emerged in 1975, and eventually became one of the institutional sponsors of the journal *Renaissance & Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, which had been founded by Natalie Zemon Davis and a number of colleagues in 1964. An ambitious series of editorial projects followed. Chief of these were the *Collected Works of Erasmus* (CWE) Editorial Project, which emerged when Ron Schoeffel, one of the editors at the University of Toronto Press, realized that there was no English translation of Erasmus' letters available in print. A group of like-minded scholars from the Press and the University gathered in 1969 to plan what Schoeffel himself described as the 'harebrained idea of a complete translation into English of all of Erasmus works', thinking that it might total 40 volumes. The project soon grew to 89 volumes, the first of which was published in 1974; 59 volumes had appeared by the end of 2012. Another critical editorial project which emerged in 1975 was the *Records of Early English Drama* (REED), spearheaded by Alexander Johnston at the University of Toronto, which has worked to "locate, transcribe, and edit historical surviving documentary evidence of drama, secular music, and other communal entertainment and ceremony from the Middle Ages until 1642, when the Puritans closed the London

theatres.”[4] Both series are published through the University of Toronto Press, which maintains the largest Renaissance list of any academic publisher in Canada. This has sometimes been supplemented by private publishers, including Dovehouse Books and Carlton Plays in Translation, both of Ottawa, or presses associated with research centres, like CRRS Publications.

Much of this work emerged out of the efforts of certain entrepreneurial individuals, and their retirement from the 1990s coincided with shifting priorities among university administrators and funding agencies. Not all retiring professors were replaced, the CER was closed in 1998 and its Press folded up, while Dovehouse Books merged with CRRS Publications. The ambitious editorial projects like CWE and REED are no longer supported as automatically or as generously by state funding. Those of an elegiac cast of mind might find much to mourn over.

Yet while the shape of Renaissance Studies have changed in the country, the accompanying appendix, *Renaissance Studies in Canada*, demonstrates that the number of scholars working in the field is high, and their work is vibrant. The appendix samples the field thoroughly, though by no means comprehensively, and demonstrates how widely diffused Renaissance Studies now are. They are found in numerous interdisciplinary programs and can now be pursued outside the major research universities and in many more undergraduate and graduate programs across the country; many of these combine Renaissance Studies with Medieval and Early Modern Studies. A rich network of societies, study groups, conferences and colloquia bring scholars together, and productivity in the form of publications has likely never been higher. While the traditional editorial projects have been challenged, they have found other sources of funding or in some cases are now migrating to digital platforms. A key example is REED Online, which makes the extraordinary research resources of this project more readily accessible to scholars and performers the world over.[5] More to the point, these mature projects are be-

ing joined by a number of newer ones initiated by younger scholars around the country who are often working in collaboration with international colleagues to position Renaissance Studies more firmly in the digital humanities.

Many of those teaching Renaissance and early modern studies now are, like their predecessors, members of the perennial academic diaspora who come to Canadian universities from overseas. Yet members of that diaspora are now less likely to come from the UK or US alone, and their global origins and research programs are one reason why Renaissance Studies in Canada now are more global and interdisciplinary in character. The work of these young scholars reaches widely, embracing a far broader range of subject matter and theoretical and methodological approaches. If the scholars of the 1960s and 1970s aimed in many ways to join in that classically modernist effort to clarify and publish the Renaissance canon, this generation pushes beyond classical texts, their white male canonical authors, and the project of modernity and into newer fields (eg., Gender Studies, Mediterranean Studies, Material History). They are also moving beyond the cultural and historical boundaries of the Western European nation states, and engaging in comparative studies that span the Atlantic and extend into Africa and Asia. They are well-connected internationally through research clusters and scholarly societies, and play leading roles in international scholarly societies. Their work is no longer limited to the classical tradition, and so some may question the extent to which we can properly speak of *Renaissance* studies. Yet to narrow the renaissance to the classical tradition alone is to strip that tradition of its context and influence, and to take from its practitioners the experiences that shaped them and the world they aimed in turn to shape. The Jesuit Louis Nicolas did not aim to write a work of classical scholarship, but it was classical scholarship that shaped the encyclopedic work he did produce, and it was classical notions of empire, culture, and civilization that drove the missionary and coloni-

zing project which took him over the seas from France to Canada. Louis Nicolas' Renaissance was indeed an early Modernity. Modern diasporic scholars in Canada do not *embody* the Renaissance in quite the way he did, nor do they see themselves as bringing culture to the natives – at least not in most cases. They aim less often to reduce others to an image of themselves, and more often to help themselves (and their colleagues and students) see with the vision of others from the period: women, aboriginals, the poor, the marginalized, exiles, migrants, and more.

### Endnotes

1. Carolyn Podruchny & Germaine Warkentin, *Decentering the Renaissance: Canada and Europe in Multi-Disciplinary Perspective, 1500-1700*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001.
2. François-Marc Gagnon, ed., *The Codex Canadensis and the Writings of Louis Nicolas: The Natural History of the New World (Histoire Naturelle Des Indes Occidentales)*. Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011. Gagnon has brought together the manuscript *Codex* and the *Histoire Naturelle*, which were rendered into modern French by Real Ouellet and into English by Nancy Senior.
3. For more information, see the websites: [www.crrs.ca](http://www.crrs.ca); <http://www.usherbrooke.ca/biblio/trouver/autres/collections-speciales/centre-detudes-de-la-renaissance-cer/>.
4. <http://www.reed.utoronto.ca/>.
5. <http://link.library.utoronto.ca/reed/>.

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Followed by an appendix on Research Centers and University teaching topics.